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ABSTRACT

An overview of the present liberal arts disciplines points out the vast amount and diversity of knowledge available to the general education student. Addressing the question of what part of this knowledge is of most worth to the prospective teacher, it is suggested that a sound general education should be organized around six basic and persistent life themes; (1) social science explanations of human behavior; (2) the physical environment; (3) health-safety-wellness; (4) communication; (5) aesthetics and literature; and (6) democratic institutions. Eighteen specific university disciplines of study, with examples of key concepts in each discipline, are cited as characteristics of a more worthwhile general studies program. A strong argument is made for completely reorganizing general studies, based on persistent life themes that are relevant to students of all ages. The basic concept undergirding this proposal is that elementary/secondary students, as well as university students preparing to teach, should engage in the same multidisciplinary studies, though at different levels of difficulty. It is proposed that teachers be certified in one of the six broad areas of a general education program rather than as specialists. (JD)

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The Nature of General Liberal Studies for Teachers

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The debate about what all college graduates need to know is endless. It is desirable and useful that this be so. The effort to delimit the most essential knowledge bases and ways of knowing needed by college graduates leads to a continuous and valuable process of adding and subtracting. Such pruning and growth of what constitutes the liberating studies has facilitated the development of new knowledge and new disciplines as well as the demise of others.

Those who believe there is an eternal, untouchable, unchanging core of liberal arts are either extremists or people uninformed about the history of the liberal arts.

The medieval universities tended to have a lower program--the trivium--comprised of grammar, logic and rhetoric, followed by a quadrivium of arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy. This was usually a three-year program. The metamorphosis of such studies over the centuries took two directions; some subjects moved into the academies which later became our secondary schools (e.g., geometry) while others, such as logic, were developed further into more complex university subjects (i.e., philosophy).

Over the centuries and within the 350 years of American higher education, the liberating arts were altered by both the development of new knowledge and by changes in the social context surrounding particular institutions. In 1636 Harvard had two

purposes: the preparation of ministers and the preparation of gentlemen--the former to lead man into heaven and the latter to lead man on earth. These institutional purposes laid the groundwork for not only theology to be considered a liberating art, but for those fields of inquiry that helped men become better civic leaders, entrepreneurs, and family heads. During the 18th and 19th centuries as the "new" fields of history, literature, economics, and political science were shaped into university studies, they too became liberating arts by virtue of being offered in liberal arts colleges. In the last hundred years even "newer" fields such as psychology, sociology, social psychology, anthropology, and comparative literature have become ensconsed in colleges of arts and letters. And most recently, the physical sciences have been added. Colleges of Liberal Arts then became Colleges of Arts and Science. This general pattern is less than 100 years old. Until very recently, modern foreign languages were not among these liberating arts. Ancient Greek, Hebrew and Latin were the only languages included in the best universities, while French, German and other modern languages were considered skills to be "picked up" in the gentlemen's precollege life experience, or by simply travelling. (Yale stopped having its commencement address delivered in Latin in only the 1950s.)

Even this minimal overview helps to explain why what we now find in our small liberal arts colleges and in the arts and science

colleges of our great public universities are varied and changing. In the emotional debates regarding excellence, there is frequently the assumption that the liberal arts are 1) agreed upon by all to encompass the same subjects, 2) that these subjects were always the basic university fare, 3) that these subjects are stable entities not in a constant state of development, and 4) that there has somehow been an erosion, in absolute numbers, of students and faculty engaged in these studies. The truth is quite the reverse. There is no common agreement on what specific subjects constitute the liberal arts, these subjects were not always offered by universities, these fields change significantly in both method and content in very short time periods and finally, there are more--not fewer--faculty in letters and science colleges each year.

A critically important dimension of this vast array of growing subject matter is that it becomes increasingly specialized. Faculty are not experts in English Literature but in the literature of a short period and further, in the writings of one individual, e.g., Blake's poems. Scientists are not simply physical scientists but chemists, and not even general chemists, but specialized research scholars concerned with the catalytic effect of one enzyme on only a few types of material. This very valuable proliferation of knowledge means that two changes occurred in the university simultaneously: the development of whole new ways of knowing (e.g., economics), and the intensive study of specialized topics within

each discipline (e.g., monetary policy of the Federal Reserve). The obvious result of these conditions is that the three or four years required to become "educated" in the 13th or 14th century would now require thirty or forty years of full-time study, were we to regard bachelors-level graduates as "educated" in the same sense.

As in other realms, the names persist when the substance has changed. The liberal arts no longer refer to an agreed-upon set of university subjects but to anything taught in a college of liberal arts or college of arts and science. It is, in effect, an operational definition; if it's taught in that college, it is "liberating." Such an operational definition uses liberating as an opposite of professional.

One way in which large public universities have recognized this metamorphosis is to more frequently use the term general or liberal studies rather than liberal arts when referring to the required courses taken by students. But whether institutions use the term liberal arts or general/liberal studies, the term is generally used to connote a body of knowledge that should be commonly held by all--and herein lies the difficulty. What is the common body of knowledge needed to be an involved citizen, an individual whose "character" has been developed and a person who now has the background to become a better practitioner of any profession?

Faculty usually debate these issues in terms of breadth and depth; breadth referring to what all students need, and depth

referring to what students who "major" in the subject need in order to continue to specialize. There is no agreed-upon answer to what constitutes breadth and depth. The operational definition is that the former is one or two survey courses and the latter is a minimum of thirty or more undergraduate credits (approximately one-quarter of the college curriculum). But these operational definitions beg the question. The question is, What knowledge is of most worth? This has never been satisfactorily answered (or even addressed) in any single content area. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is not answered by the large public university which seeks to represent a broad array of subject matters.

What to do to resolve this dilemma? The resolution is an operational one achieved by a combination of administrative policy and faculty politics. The university requires some types of courses of all students and declares others to be elective. Again, it is useful to note that this has not always been the case. Courses were not always the medium for exchanging university knowledge. Lectures, tutoring, examinations, collaborative experimenting, discourse, and various other pedagogic methods characterized medieval universities. It was not until after the American Civil War that courses as we now use them were developed. Actually, this American invention of a course with a specific amount of credit attached to it copied the practices of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point (which did not offer a college-level program until the

1930s). Studies at the Military Academy were organized, for the first time, into timed classes with an assigned weight (credit) for each year and with some studies required as prerequisite to others (Rapp, 1981). After the Civil War, Pres. Eliot of Harvard built on the idea of courses in order to give students time for studies (electives) they wanted to pursue (Morrison, 1930).

We know, therefore, that what the unthinking might regard as a common core of knowledge organized into required college courses has not been a constant over time and does not represent any agreed-upon knowledge base--for citizens, professionals, or even gentlemen. On the contrary, the college course represents a made-in-America artifact which simply expedites the offering of university degree programs.

The university administration supports a curricular organization based on courses to expedite the collection of fees, the use of transcripts and the application of entrance requirements. The faculty, however, determines the actual content. Since there are divergent views, the problem is resolved by faculty voting. Voting to determine requirements accounts for the differences in what constitutes general/liberal studies (as well as breadth and depth) in one university as opposed to another. Cynics claim that the faculty votes its prejudices--i.e., language professors support the need for two years of a modern foreign language for all, while professors of history, English, philosophy,

economics, political science, psychology, biology, chemistry, physics also vote their courses into requirements. Idealists regard such faculty determination as a community of scholars reaching thoughtful decisions for the common good.

This background is essential for those planning the curricula of all professionals including future teachers. The teacher needs general liberal studies for all the same reasons any college graduate needs them and as a basis for teaching particular subject matter to children and youth. (Teachers also need knowledge in a third realm--professional knowledge--which is not addressed in this paper.)

In the most ideal, nonpoliticized university, what are the general/liberal studies that would be of most worth for teachers? There are several characteristics of this knowledge base.

Multidisciplinary. The lives, mental processes and problems of children and youth are not separated neatly into biology, physical education, English, etc. Neither are the lives, mental processes and problems of teachers, college graduates or anyone else. Life comes at us in unseparated wholes and we fail or succeed by making multiresponses to complex issues. As universities (and lower schools) are presently organized, it is the learner's responsibility rather the teacher's or the curriculum to put all the different ways of knowing together.

For example, most students have had a physical education

lecture/demonstration on what smoking does to lung tissue. This can be a valuable lesson. In life, however, the issue comes in a multidisciplinary manner. To answer students' questions of why the federal government subsidizes tobacco farmers, some basic concepts of agricultural economics are necessary. To answer students' concerns of why senators vote the way they do, some knowledge of political science is necessary. To understand advertisers, some psychology would be helpful. To understand the statements of the F.D.A., one must understand basic research processes and the differences between correlation and causality from a research point of view. Sociologists have basic understandings of why particular states or groups bar smoking in some life situations and other constituencies regard the practice as sophisticated. In dealng with the issue on a personal/family level, psychiatrists look at the matter of emotional needs which are to be understood using their particular way of knowing. Economists present compelling arguments on what we all pay in higher medical costs as well as in increased prices for goods that are produced with higher absentee rates. And so it goes. Will blowing smoke through a handkerchief in a physical education class "teach" the students the effects of smoking? Is it desirable or even possible to put a smoking unit into every course? Obviously, the most reasonable curricular solution is to deal with real learning from a multidisciplinary point of view. Is it reasonable to expect students to integrate all the discrete subject

matters if their teachers and schools do not?

Applied. A useful knowledge base for teachers (and all other college graduates) deals with the applications of knowledge. After analyzing issues and problems from a multidisciplinary point of view, the student is quite reasonable when s/he raises the question of what practical value the concepts have. Again, school/university curricula do not plan for "how-to" in liberal/general studies, unless they require a work study program or some sort of off-campus living learning experience. A second form of knowledge use is to generate further knowledge. The gaining of new knowledge, insights, skills inevitably leads to higher order questions. All of us can understand and participate in this knowledge generating process to some degree.

Individualized. A third characteristic of general liberal studies is that they not confuse choice with individualization. "The major in most colleges is little more than a gathering of courses taken in one department, lacking structure and depth. Catalogs ask the student to pick eight of the following courses and there might be 100 listed." (AAC, 1985) My experience is that students make such choices based on peer recommendations of instructors and the time/day the class is scheduled. Ideally, somebody--even a computer--could make some assessment of what students already know and which areas of study they might prefer to continue. Obviously, if a university permits a student to choose a

few courses from a wide array, it has already accepted and supported individualization to an extent since different students will graduate learning different things. It is only a short step to carry this on to full individualization, i.e., to help students also be different in ways that are most meaningful to them. This might involve combining parts of courses with courses not presently included in the major, or with knowledge yet to be put into the form of a course.

Continuous Revision. A sound program of general liberal studies is revised at least every five years. What is known in existing disciplines that are commonly regarded as stable is actually changing. (E.g., There are researchers learning more about the structure of seven-hundred-year-old cathedrals all the time.) Imagine, therefore, the growth of disciplines regarded as new (e.g., "Ecology and its Effects on Nutrition and Wellness"). The changing nature of students, societal demands and institutional missions need to also be periodically reexamined in terms of the liberal/general studies being required. Is it reasonable for a student of the 1980s to move into the future with a curriculum developed on what we knew and believed about the future in 1970?

Methods of study. In order to engage in processes of thinking--analyzing and synthesizing; combining and recombining concepts; imagining and hypothesizing; testing and judging; comparing and contrasting; exemplifying and summarizing;--it is

necessary to be taught these conceptual skills. "The academic major should emphasize inquiry, abstract thinking, critical analysis. If anything is given attention in our colleges and universities, thinking must be it." (AAC, p.24) Whether general/liberal studies claim to be providing breadth or depth (i.e., one survey course or a major sequence), they are of little value without practice in the critical thinking engaged in by those who generate the knowledge in the particular field. The statement that college should teach people how to learn, think, problem solve, and not necessarily information about particular subject matter content, is only a cliche unless the program of study emphasizes such ways of knowing.

Collaborative as well as individual study. This is a critical yet frequently overlooked characteristic of a school/university general studies program. The business community has been brought to the value of this position (kicking and screaming) by the Japanese. Teachers on all levels still ask, "How do I know who earned which grade if they work as a team?," as if the ultimate value to be preserved is a simplistic way to give grades rather than a useful system for preparing students for life and work. Life and work in the world beyond schools requires that individuals contribute to some form of group/team/concerted effort. Which professionals, citizens, or family members apply knowledge as isolates? Is it possible to even survive in American society without the skills of collaborative effort?

Direct experience. Learning experiences in liberal/general studies can build in the dimension of direct experience. At present, such participation is largely reserved for the pre-professional and professional curricula. Would not the studies of humanities, social and physical science be enhanced by setting up and incorporating direct experiences for students? In some subjects (e.g., geology) the field trip has become traditional. Such experiences can be extended to include greater periods of direct involvement and less class time in any area of study.

These are seven characteristics of a sound general/liberal studies program that seem to me to derive from my previous assumption about the present nature of such studies in colleges and universities. The building blocks of general/liberal studies programs should be specific knowledge concepts and ways of studying particular subject matters. Which piece of knowledge can be labelled economics and which piece can be labelled history is a school-created issue, not a problem of living or learning in the real world. Academics frequently seek to protect the "integrity" of economics or history or whatever. By this they refer to their ability to classify a study as one appropriate to their field. This is an academic not a scholarly endeavor. If one learns that controlling trade routes was a cause of World War I, what difference does it make if we label this cause a study of economics or of history? Such distinctions are only of import in schools and

universities where we artificially divide knowledge into courses and then teach courses in isolation rather than as multidisciplinary studies. Once fragmented in this artificial manner, it does make a real difference whether we learn from economists the ways they use to assess trade problems or whether we ask historians the ways they use to analyze the same events. They will not only use different methodologies, but identify different concepts and significant events.

I recognize that reorganizing liberal studies is a far-reaching proposal. The following is merely an example of a few concepts in general/liberal studies. Such concepts might be regrouped into multidisciplinary studies rather than retained under existing headings.

Communication

-All persons are, to some degree, public.

-Communication is the central human behavior.

-Communication, while ubiquitous and cheap, can never be guaranteed.

History

-The extent to which the future can be anticipated is a function of thoroughness in understanding the past.

-Documentation controls historical fact.

Philosophy

-How does one think in universal terms (philosophically)?

Political Science

-The rules are never neutral.

-All government decisions are interim.

-Political activists never represent the majority.

-Majority rules, minority rights.

Mathematics

-Zero, infinity and balance are key concepts of mathematics.

-Mathematics is a language for expressing logical relationships.

-(Operations on numbers are a small part of mathematics.)

Economics

-The theory of price determination is based on generalizations regarding demand and quantity.

-Scarcity, real cost, production, capital, growth, money supply, etc., are interrelated concepts.

Psychology

-Human behavior can best be understood and predicted by studying the behavior of individuals.

Sociology

-Human behavior can best be understood and predicted by studying the group behavior of people in social institutions--work, family, school.

Anthropology

-Human behavior can best be understood and predicted by total immersion in the life of a community.

Geography

-Human behavior can best be understood and predicted by studying the relation of people to their life space.

Geology

-Time is a geologic concept.

-Organic and inorganic evolution refer to systematic developments and are interrelated.

-Energy: Nature to be commanded must be obeyed.

Architecture

-The ordering and organization of human environments not only reflects the culture but shapes it.

-Human behavior reflects a reaction to the man-made as well as to the natural environment.

Botany

-Green plants, given essential elements and environment, can produce their own food through photosynthesis--the conversion of light energy to chemical energy.

Physical Education

-All human movement is functional, sport, exercise, or dance.

-Human functions have integrity: mind vs. body

distinctions are artificial.

-Gross motor behavior promotes wellness.

Arts

-Music is based on the concepts of tempo, tonality, and harmony.

-Dance is a function of time, effort, and shape.

-Visual arts utilize color, shape, texture and divisions of space.

Science

-What is scientifically true is determined by specific procedures of scientific investigation.

-The law of conservation means that mass and energy can be accounted for even though transformed.

Literature

-Creative writing is not the province of a special few.

-Literary analyses deal with stating criteria for assessing "goodness."

International Relations

-The process of identifying parallel interests or "trade offs" permits nations to negotiate.

Proposal. After a range of such concepts are gleaned from faculty who offer general/liberal studies (Every well-organized course has less than ten basic concepts.), they can be regrouped under a very few theme areas. Studies qualify to be theme areas if

they are of critical importance and persistent throughout life. By regrouping what we advocate that people learn in general studies, we would be taking a first but major step toward organizing knowledge into forms in which it can be used. The persistent life themes around which general studies for learners of all ages might be organized include the following:

I. Social Science Explanations of Human Behavior.

Explanations and predictions of human behavior vary by discipline. Social psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and/or political science each have ways of explaining the same phenomena using different constructs and methods of analysis. Rather than studying different events in discrete courses, such studies would be most beneficial if they brought their divergent assumptions to bear on the same events and situations in one multidisciplinary approach that involved direct applications to living.

II. The Physical Environment.

Students benefit from basic understandings of how the real world works. I am continually amazed by "graduates" who sincerely believe that the only things that are true are those things people perceive to be true. Requiring students to take one or two science courses has obviously not been a solution to the nonscience view of life held by many graduates. Students who opt for biology are not taught basic concepts of physics, chemistry, astronomy, or geology.

(In the real world the overspecialization of scientists is compensated for by having them work in teams.) Graduates who will be consumers rather than producers of scientific knowledge benefit most by gaining multidisciplinary explanations of how the real world works. Imagine trying to learn the effects of water pollution, acid rain and insecticides on animals and people by studying only one discipline!

III. Communication.

Only the university separates human interaction into different courses--listening, reading, writing and speaking are taught in mutually exclusive courses. Writing is further divided into business writing, creative writing, writing for publication, etc. As if such chopping up were not sufficiently ill-advised, this artificial array of discrete courses is then separated further into different departments in different schools and colleges: mass communications, media, television and computers, the School of Journalism, etc. In truth, all forms of interaction--including nonverbal forms and aesthetic statements (landscape, architecture, sculpture, painting and drama) can be taught in the interrelated forms in which they come to us in life.

IV. Health-Safety-Wellness

The fields of study that contribute to this persistent life theme include studies in dance, physical education, nutrition, psychology, aging in America, physiology, criminal justice,

family/community living, financial management, simple machines, horticulture, animal care, parenting/grandparenting, and several others.

V. Aesthetics and Literature

Visual and other art forms can also be taught as multidisciplinary studies which have meaning in the lives of students. The same phenomena generates different responses from different people: a play, a poem, a story, a painting, a song, or a model have all been generated by common experiences. It is only in the university (or through having handicapping conditions) that people are actually taught to "hear" but not simultaneously see, smell, touch, or respond.

VI. Democratic Institutions

Comparisons of test scores in the United States with those of students in other countries frequently overlook the basic purposes of our general/liberal studies--to prepare individuals in the civic arts who will be active, involved citizens of a democratic society. The way our multilevel government works (and doesn't work) cannot be separated from studying our history, international relations, political science, comparative religion, ethnography, transportation, demography, and the development of cities. These and other ways of knowing all contribute to an understanding of current problems and issues. Is it conceivable that any problem--defense, the budget, health costs, welfare, education,

jobs, inflation, foreign trade--can be dealt with by knowing only the constructs of one university discipline?

The six persistent life themes I have outlined above may not be the best or the only way of reorganizing a general/liberal studies curriculum. I propose these themes as one way to satisfy the seven characteristics of an effective general studies program described earlier in the paper. I also recognize the difficulty of transforming curricula in schools and universities from discrete courses into a more meaningful organization. I would, nevertheless, persist in this position and go even further: Teachers should be certified in one of these six theme areas and not as teachers of kindergarten, home economics, or mathematics. State licensing procedures can then become a means rather than an obstacle to changing school/university curricula.

It is helpful to note that what we are engaged in here--clarifying which liberal studies are of most worth for teachers--will be a continuing issue. Prior to the Civil War, educators criticized general studies curricula as bloated and confused, with just too much to learn.

> "... we have so crowded it with studies as to render it superficial and probably less valuable ... (Wayland, 1842)
>
> ... The amount which the college is required to teach is doubled, if not trebled, but the time in which all of this is to be done remains to a day just as it was before." (Wayland, p. 80)

Present discussions of liberal studies usually separate what teachers need to know as people and as citizens from what they need to know in order to be better prepared to teach the subject matters they directly offer children and youth. The characteristics of general/liberal studies discussed in this paper can be pursued in both the university and in high schools and elementary schools. A university curriculum organized around persistent life themes has the potential for providing both the range of knowledge needed by future citizens as well as the concentrated study required for future teachers.

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